

# **\*\*ATTENTION\*\***

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## **Bighorn Sheep**

*Ovis canadensis*

### Range:

The Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep is found in Alberta, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, Oregon, Nevada, New Mexico, Colorado, Montana, and Wyoming, while the California bighorn sheep is found as scattered populations along the eastern slopes of the Cascade Mountains in British Columbia, Washington, Oregon, and California, as well as in Idaho, Nevada, and North Dakota (Trefethen 1975).

### Washington Distribution:

Local populations of Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep are found in the Selkirk Mountains on Hall Mountain and in the Blue Mountains near Joseph Creek and the Wenaha- Tucannon Wilderness. Local populations of California bighorn sheep are found on the Sinlahekin, Wooten, Colockum, Oak Creek, and L.T. Murray Wildlife Areas, as well as in Swakane Canyon, Mount Hull, Vulcan Mountain, and the Asotin Creek-Cottonwood Creek areas (Johnson 1983).

### Habitat Requirements:

Bighorn habitat consists primarily of grasslands or grass/shrub habitats adjacent to, or intermixed with precipitous terrain characterized by rocky slopes, ridges and cliffs, or rugged canyons. The rolling hills and low-growing vegetation that allows bighorns to see predators from a distance (Johnson 1983). This rugged terrain also serves as escape cover and lambing areas.

Optimum winter range is on south-facing slopes with a predominance of bluebunch wheatgrass, Sandberg bluegrass, Junegrass, and Idaho fescue, or a mixture of shrubs and bunchgrasses. Bighorns prefer to forage on open slopes in the winter, but will utilize forested areas for cover during storms (Johnson 1983).

Bighorn sheep lambing areas are isolated, rugged, steep areas of irregular size with sparse trees and shrubs with both water and native forage no more than 0.5 km (0.3 mi) away. Ewes typically seek the most precipitous terrain of their range for lambing to escape the threat of predation.

### Limiting Factors:

An abundance of climax, native, low-growing vegetation adjacent to or intermixed with precipitous terrain is necessary (Johnson 1983). Human disturbance, especially during winter and through mid-June that is within 0.8 km (0.5 mi), contributes to displacement and population decline (Hammit and Cole 1987). Diseases and parasites can limit populations. Entire populations in other states and provinces have been decimated by disease contracted from domestic sheep.

### Management Recommendations:

Maintain some thermal and escape cover patches of at least .4 ha (1 acre) on summer ranges. Avoid human and dog use on foot and in vehicles within 0.8 km (0.5 mi) in winter and through mid-June (Hammit and Cole 1987). Roads on sheep range lead to disturbance and poaching problems that can be avoided by road closures during periods of bighorn use. Use prescribed burning every three years as necessary to maintain grassland forage areas. Develop water sources where needed. Prohibit domestic sheep grazing and limit livestock grazing on sheep ranges.

### References:

Johnson, Rolf L. 1983. Mountain Goats and Mountain Sheep of Washington. Washington State Game Department. Biol. Bull. No. 18. 196 pp.

Hammitt, W. E. and D. Cole. 1987. Wildland Recreation. Wiley and Sons. 341 pp.

Trefethen, J. B., ed. 1975. Wild Sheep in Modern North America. Boone and Crockett Club, The Winchester Press. New York. 302 pp.

USDA Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management. 1983. Wildlife Habitats in Managed Rangelands - the Great Basin of Southeastern Oregon. Gen. Tech. Rep. PNW-159. Special Edition, March 1986.

Key Points:

Habitat Requirements:

- Climax plant communities of subalpine, grassland, shrub-grass, desert, and fire-created grassland types.
- Adjacent or nearby rocky slopes, ridges, cliffs, or rugged canyons.
- Escape terrain.
- Freedom from disturbance 0.5 to one mile.

Management Recommendations:

- Maintain some cover patches.
- Maintain vigorous, native grassland habitats.
- Create food and water sources as necessary.
- Eliminate certain public uses seasonally.
- Eliminate domestic sheep grazing and limit livestock grazing on bighorn sheep ranges.